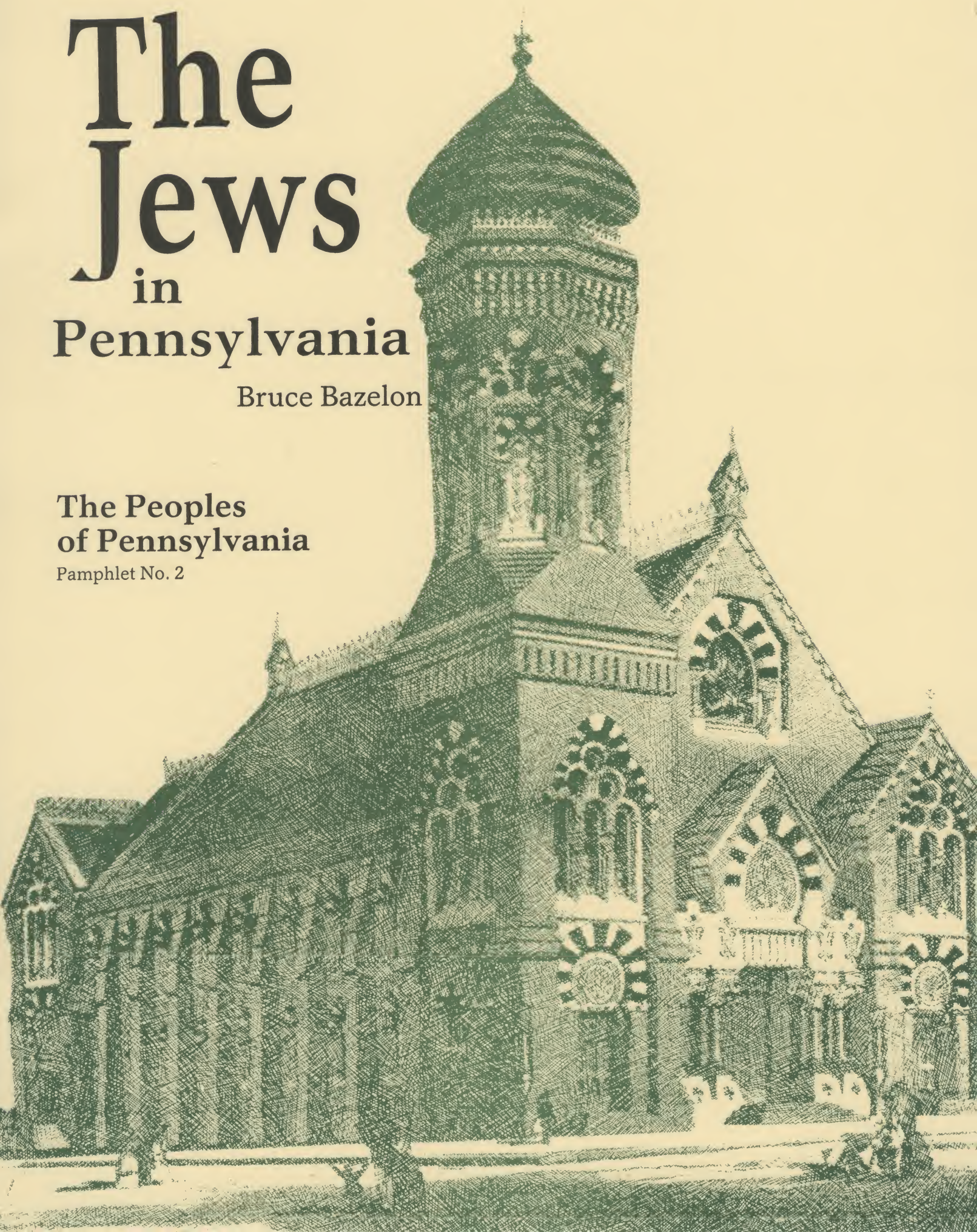


# The Jews in Pennsylvania

Bruce Bazelon

The Peoples  
of Pennsylvania

Pamphlet No. 2





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## Foreword

**T**he United States is composed of people from many cultural and national backgrounds. Americans can trace their ancestry to Europeans, Africans, Asians, Latin Americans, Australians and American Indians. Today, our population consists of people from over one hundred ethnic groups.

Since its founding in 1681, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania has been among the states with the greatest diversity of population. While Pennsylvanians share a common regional and political identity, they also form a mixture of national and ethnic cultures and religious traditions. No history of the Commonwealth would be adequate without coverage of the rich diversity of Pennsylvania's populace.

Thus, the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission is publishing these booklets which depict ethnic groups as a means of introducing to the public the history of the many peoples who have made Pennsylvania's history and who have built this great Commonwealth. In this way the Commission continues its efforts to preserve, interpret and disseminate the history of all Pennsylvanians.

**Cover:** The synagogue of Congregation Rodeph Shalom, Philadelphia. Courtesy Philadelphia Jewish Archives Center at the Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies, Philadelphia.

**Jews in Pennsylvania**

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# The Jews in Pennsylvania

Pennsylvania's eleven million people include about 440,000 Jews, of whom more than half live in greater Philadelphia, some 45,000 in Pittsburgh, and more than a thousand in each of fifteen other communities. The early Jews settled widely and were often influential, though during the eighteenth century few communities had the ten men necessary to constitute a ritually legal congregation.

Whether in 1750 or 1900, the pattern of Jewish settlement was the same. Only a few came at first, often as pack peddlers or minor merchants, but not, like most of their neighbors, as farmers. They were joined eventually by relatives and fellow countrymen, forming a community and building a synagogue in their adopted town. Some, like the Kauffmans of Pittsburgh, founded important commercial enterprises. Most, however, set up family businesses, to which in time their children succeeded, or else turned to the professions or the arts—occupations denied to Jews in their homelands. The first Jews in Pennsylvania knew, of course, that they represented a larger community and routinely carried on social and business correspondence with Jews in Europe, the West Indies, French Canada, and in coastal cities like Newport, Charleston and Savannah.

Their religion, one of the oldest, had its origin about 1700 B.C. with the Patriarch Abraham. Jews thrived in the ancient world, with military and commercial colonies throughout the Roman and Persian empires. However, they were not happy as a Roman province and twice rebelled, losing their homeland finally in the second century A.D. During the Middle Ages two basic divisions developed—the Mediterranean Jews of Arab lands, which then included Spain and Portugal, and the Jews of Christian Europe. The former were termed *Sephardic*, the latter *Ashkenazic*.

## Jews in the Modern World

The Middle Ages were a difficult time for the Jews, with persecution alternating with grudging toleration. But during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as political thought became more liberal, the Jews of western Europe and Germany began to acquire the full rights of citizens. In contrast with this, Russia became more autocratic and oppressive toward minorities, Jews included, and when the Russian Empire absorbed Lithuania and a large part of Poland, it inherited a majority of Europe's Jews—a consequence welcome to neither the Russians nor the Jews.

In this European environment, doctrinal divisions appeared. German Jews were eager to be accepted as

Germans, and in the second quarter of the nineteenth century the *Reform* movement, intended to square Judaism with "modern" times, began. Hence, much of the distinctive dress, diet and custom was discarded. Russian Europe, by contrast, remained *Orthodox*, its commitments unchanged. Moreover, reacting to the persecutions of the seventeenth century, a new movement, *Chassidism*, stressed emotional commitment rather than study of religious law (the *Talmud*) as the basis of faith.

Oliver Cromwell as Lord Protector of England (1653-1658) allowed Jews after 350 years to resettle in that country. Hence, Jews could also live in the colonies as British subjects. However, few, if any, migrated to Philadelphia during William Penn's time. Indeed, through the middle of the eighteenth century the Pennsylvania oath of office excluded non-Christians from public office. Thus, the seventeenth-century home of American Judaism was New York, with Sephardic offshoot communities established in the early eighteenth century in several coastal cities. By the 1730s there were practicing Jews in Philadelphia and Jewish merchants at the sites of Easton, Lancaster, Heidelberg (Schaefferstown) and Pittsburgh.

## The Jews in Pennsylvania

Jewish communities, like those of Lancaster and Schaefferstown, while sometimes illuminated by notable personalities, were very small and could disappear with the departure of just a few families. On the other hand, the Philadelphia community was well established, the early period of Jewish settlement bringing some one hundred persons to Philadelphia. Barnard Gratz and his brother Michael came to Pennsylvania from Upper Silesia in central Europe and founded one of the great mercantile houses of colonial America. David Franks, born in New York of German parents, established another. Some of the trade of these firms was with Pennsylvania's frontier settlements, utilizing agents such as Joseph Simon, a leading figure of the Lancaster community. Through fair practices and well-earned success, these men were respected in Pennsylvania. Other Jews were licensed to trade with the Indians, or became peddlers, carrying their portable businesses through the small towns of Pennsylvania.

American Jews sided overwhelmingly with the Revolution, and many left the port cities when these were occupied by the British. One was Haym Salomon, a native of Poland who came to Philadelphia from New York, where his Patriot activities had apparently made him unwelcome to the British

occupation. Salomon arrived in Philadelphia destitute, but his shrewd brokerage dealings gave him the business of cashing the notes by which France was helping to finance the Revolution. Haym Salomon proved himself a selfless patriot, though he did not, as some accounts suggest, finance the Revolution. He died in 1785 at age forty-five.

Some Jews, however, were loyal to the King. David Franks, a Tory, left Philadelphia to live in British-occupied New York. Though his loyalty cost him his fortune, he returned to Philadelphia and lived there his last days. His daughter Rebecca, who married Col. Henry Johnson, a British officer she had met in Philadelphia during its occupation, lived thereafter in England as Lady Johnson.

Jewish refugees raised the Philadelphia community to perhaps a thousand during the latter part of the war—Newport, New York, Charleston and Savannah being still under occupation. The refugees' determination brought about the founding of the city's first congregation, Mikveh Israel, whose first synagogue on Cherry Street and Sterling Alley was dedicated in September 1782. The congregation, however, was at once beset by problems: With the Revolution closing and the refugees leaving, the Jewish community shrank to little more than its former size—estimated in 1775 at three hundred.

The refugees who were so influential in Philadelphia in 1782 were largely Sephardic and left Mikveh Israel with a legacy of the Sephardic ritual, even though ethnically the Philadelphia community was Ashkenazic. This synagogue, therefore, had the stamp of the eighteenth century rather than the nineteenth, when there came a major influx of German Jews who wanted their own ritual and their own congregation. With the founding of the German Hebrew Society's Congregation Rodeph Shalom about 1795, Philadelphia became one of the first cities to have two synagogues. The second synagogue set the tone for further Jewish settlement because its foundation represented a major change in the character of the Jewish community. In Europe there was one *kahal* (community) and its elders spoke for the entire Jewish population of a city or area. This was not to be the case in America, where individual cities and congregations within those cities became distinct and separate entities. Rodeph Shalom was an early, perhaps the earliest, example of this new American Judaism. For all this, the Jews in Philadelphia got along well, and no quarrels seem to have arisen from the foundation of a second synagogue.

As a small minority, the Jews faced grave problems of acceptance in the general community. A number of children of these pioneer families married outside their religion, a circumstance regarded as a severe threat by a people proud of their distinctive religious

heritage. The Gratz-Simon family proved to be no exception: Rebecca's aunt married a gentile and was not forgiven for this transgression. It is believed that Rebecca herself loved a non-Jew, but neither would leave his own heritage. Rebecca, in fact, did not marry, but devoted her long life to the improvement of the city of Philadelphia, becoming in effect Philadelphia's First Lady of charity. She was especially instrumental in the founding of Philadelphia's orphan asylum in 1814.

## The German Migration

The Pennsylvania community had always been largely of eastern European origin, particularly of German Jews from Prussian Poland and Silesia. However, a steady stream of Jewish and non-Jewish Germans entered during the first forty years of the nineteenth century, augmented in the late 1840s and the 1850s by large numbers, including Jews, seeking asylum after the failure of liberal revolutions in a number of the German states. Many of the gentile Germans went to the newly settled states of the Middle West to farm, but the Jews, seeking business contacts, scattered throughout the country, with Pennsylvania becoming the home of many.

German Jews were welcomed among Pennsylvania's German-speaking population and among their Jewish brethren in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. Those who sought a commercial role in medium-size communities did especially well. In Harrisburg, as an example, some of the larger stores were by 1900 owned by the families of the original German Jews. The Jewish community in Germany, to gain legitimacy and respect, had demonstrated its members' willingness to become good Germans. This attitude, brought to the United States, inclined its members to an interest in civic affairs and public charities. Religious developments kept pace, and by the late 1860s the majority of Orthodox German congregations in the U.S. had joined the Reform. There were, of course, exceptions. Some congregations did not wish to change, or did not believe that the characteristics that separated the Jew from others should all be discarded. One of the major holdouts—until the 1890s—was Congregation Rodeph Shalom of Philadelphia, under the great Rabbi Marcus Jastrow.

Orthodox or Reform, the German Jews increased the number of Pennsylvania's congregations. Pittsburgh had two, its own distinct Rodeph Shalom, founded in 1856, and a second, Etz Hayim, formed in 1864 by those who did not wish to turn from Orthodoxy to Reform. Etz Hayim, however, joined the Conservative movement in 1886, a middle ground, as we shall see, between two poles. Communities which had languished, as had that of Lancaster since Joseph



Simon's death, were refounded by the new German influx. A new synagogue, Shaarai Shomayim, was founded there in 1856, and typically turned to reform ten years later. Harrisburg's German Jewish congregation was and is Ohev Shalom, founded with sixteen members in 1863. This congregation embraced Reform doctrine in 1867, and by 1900 had thirty-five members. This had doubled by 1920, when it was decided to admit well-to-do eastern European Jews. These stories are typical and show the nineteenth-century German community as prosperous, proud of both its German and American roots, and anxious to prove that its members were full-fledged Americans.

Contemporaneous communities had been founded or had grown dramatically in Reading, Pottsville, Wilkes-Barre, Scranton, Erie, Allentown, Danville and Honesdale (which has the smallest synagogue in the U.S.). By 1870 most medium-size towns had, at the least, a legal congregation (ten men) of German Jews. The *Encyclopedia Judaica* estimates that by 1877 there were seventeen thousand Jews in Pennsylvania.

## The Eastern European Migration

Into the affluent, upwardly mobile world of the German Jews, beginning in the late 1870s, came a mass of Jews from the Russian Empire, a movement that gathered momentum from the anti-Semitic laws of 1881 and continued through 1914. Between 1889 and 1910 some one hundred thousand eastern European Jews migrated to Pennsylvania. Old communities were vastly augmented and new ones were formed. By the end of the immigration period in the mid-1920s, more than three hundred thousand Jews lived in Pennsylvania.

Whereas the German Jews were comparatively well integrated, Jews in Russia were carefully segregated and ostracized in areas known as the Pale of Settlement—made up of the old Polish-Lithuanian homeland absorbed by Russia in the eighteenth century. These impoverished, backward communities were untouched by earlier immigration, or indeed by much of anything. The enlightenment had reached them in watered-down form, yet their response to it, overall, was to become more narrowly religious. Alexander II, the Czar liberator, had attempted to improve the lot of his subjects, Jews included. His assassination in 1881 gave the government a pretext for clamping tighter restrictions on Jews and their trades, thereby insuring their continuation on a bare subsistence. To accentuate this policy, the government looked on as anti-Semitic riots, known as *pogroms*, decimated the Jewish communities. While some Russian Jews had immigrated in the 1870s in search of economic betterment, the motive after 1881 was escape. The Russian government's frankly stated

Jewish policy was that one-third should convert, one-third should immigrate, and the rest should be killed.

The German-American Jews, who were now getting along well, looked on in horror as their impoverished co-religionists debarked on America's shores. They had left Russia with next to nothing, and when they arrived in Pennsylvania, as elsewhere, they found that German Jews had exhausted what opportunities there were in retail stores. The new immigrants, therefore, took jobs as peddlers in the small communities of Pennsylvania or worked in sweat shops in larger cities.

The life of a pack peddler was arduous. His trade goods were carried on his back as he traveled from one community to another. He sold his goods and bought scrap rags or iron which could be sold to processing firms for a profit. When he had some money he might buy a cart and horse. Gradually the peddlers settled down, perhaps to own a peddlers' supply store or rag-processing business. By the 1950s the last peddlers had hung up their packs and sold their horses.

Having accumulated some money, the Jews could send for relatives in Russia. Usually the husband or a strong son came first and sent tickets one by one for wife, children, parents and in-laws. Hence the settlement of the Russian Jews tended to be from a particular locality in Russia to one in the U.S. A cultural exclusiveness was established to which the children of these immigrants reacted adversely, squandering in the process some of the richness of Jewish life. This clannishness failed completely in bridging the gap between the first and second generation in America. Finally, the holocaust of World War II destroyed the Jewish communities of Russia themselves and completed the process of cultural extinction.

The German community in America was a little ashamed of its poorer relations from eastern Europe, but at the same time it saw them as brothers—somewhat unwashed—but still brothers. It was they who encouraged these opponents of Reform to take the middle of the road in the mid-1880s to Conservative Judaism, which has since grown to America's largest denomination. This movement sought to keep what was essential in Judaism, while allowing changes essential to accommodate the modern American lifestyle.

## Their Accomplishments

Except in McKeesport, where Jews were sometimes identified as Hungarians, the Jewish presence in Pennsylvania's manufacturing mills was negligible. They were employed, however, by some iron and steel companies to manage the company store, as they

were familiar with the languages of many of the workers. This facility with languages, born from the diverse ethnic situations in the homelands of many of the Jews, stood them well in Pennsylvania. One industry in which the Jews stood out was the "stogey" industry, centered in Pittsburgh, but also found in Philadelphia. Cigar manufacturing was considered a Jewish trade, and it was no accident that Samuel Gompers, one of the first labor-union organizers and a Jew, entered the Knights of Labor from the cigar trade. It is estimated that in the beginning of this century there were some 235 cigar factories in Pittsburgh, 133 of them located in the Hill section, which was Jewish. In 1914 this was the fifth largest industry in Pittsburgh.

Pittsburgh, like other large Jewish communities, boasted a Yiddish theater and dramatic clubs. Jews who had never known a sport in their homelands found their children avid for basketball, baseball, skating, boxing and golf. The lightweight boxing champion of the World War I era, Battling Levinsky of Philadelphia, attests to an adult interest as well. YMHA's (Young Men's Hebrew Associations) were often organized around this enthusiasm for sport, and evolved into the Jewish Community Centers of the post-1920s, which were located in almost all Jewish communities.

As the Jewish population in Pennsylvania's larger cities grew, the inevitable move toward the suburbs commenced. Pittsburgh provides a typical situation. It begins in 1842 when a *minyan* of ten men was first able to assemble. By the 1850s there were some thirty families in downtown Pittsburgh. From this "triangle," Pittsburgh's Jews soon moved to the adjacent Hill section. In the early twentieth century, with a population of fifteen thousand, the Hill was overcrowded, and the movement continued to Squirrel Hill, Oakland and the East End. Today the movement is even more diverse, with settlement in most of the suburbs and smaller communities of the Pittsburgh area.

The older community helped Pittsburgh's eastern European Jews while remaining separate from them—the Gusky Orphanage and Hebrew Free Loan Association were founded in the first years of the present century. The *Encyclopedia Judaica* estimates that in 1912 there were thirty-five thousand Jews in Pittsburgh, and a dozen years later a peak of sixty thousand. Today's population is about forty-five thousand, but this does not include the Jews who have moved to suburbs within commuting distance. Through this process, the eastern European Jews have joined their German predecessors in integrating into American life, and have even attained a share of the responsibility for Rodeph Shalom. The community has produced such notables as Dr. Jonas Salk, discoverer of the polio vaccine; Otto Stern, Nobel

prizewinner; Bernard L. Cohen, a physicist who was instrumental in cyclotron research; Leon Edel, the biographer of Henry James; and Max M. Fisher, a major force in national Republican politics.

Philadelphia's story is similar. The community of twelve thousand in 1880 increased fifteen-fold in thirty-five years to two hundred thousand. This population began its own migration from South Philadelphia and the Northern Liberties through such areas as Strawberry Mansion to the Greater Northeast, along Old York Road and in Mt. Airy, as well as west along the Main Line. Of the more than one hundred congregations located in Philadelphia today, about half are *Conservative*, forty percent are *Orthodox*, and the remainder are *Reform* or *Reconstructionist* (liberal). Philadelphia has recently added a growing *Chassidic* (Lubavitch) presence, though the Lubavitcher roots in Philadelphia extend to 1893.

In 1968 a Reconstructionist college was founded on the campus of Temple University. The city has also spawned great Jewish newspapers, with the *Jewish Exponent* (1887) and the *Jewish Times* (1925) replacing the *Occident* in the mid-nineteenth century. Philadelphia has also been the home of such persons as Maxine Kumin, Pulitzer Prize author of children's books; actress Elaine May; geologist Paul Emrich; Arthur Penn, who has directed such movies as *The Miracle Worker* and *Bonnie and Clyde*; and the founder of CBS, William Paley. Perhaps Philadelphia's best-known Jewish citizen was Walter Annenberg, publisher of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, ambassador to Great Britain in the Nixon Administration, and a major force in Pennsylvania and national politics for many years. His father Moses Annenberg, rising from a penniless immigrant from East Prussia, bought the paper in 1936. The Annenberg School of Communications of the University of Pennsylvania bears the family name, as do philanthropies in the Philadelphia area and elsewhere.

## The Jewish Community Today

Pennsylvania's larger Jewish communities, though losing members to the suburbs, are alive and vibrant. Revived interest in ethnic "roots" and pride in the State of Israel—the homeland the Jew never had in Europe—has combined with the vitality received from a resurgent Orthodoxy to make Judaism a source of pride. The state of small-town Judaism in Pennsylvania is clearly a different matter. As expressed by a member of the Levin family who spent his entire life in the Huntingdon, Pennsylvania, area, the demise of the independent retailer has been the end of the small Jewish community. Faced with shopping malls and larger distribution systems, the children and grandchildren of the peddlers who



opened small businesses now have no economic base in the towns that have hosted them most of the twentieth century. Many have closed their doors and moved to larger cities, following their children who saw no future in the family business. Many synagogues, like Tiphereth Israel in Steelton, are only a memory—not even the building remains; while others, such as Bnai Jacob in Middletown, are maintained from a sense of family loyalty by the children of former congregants, who now live in Harrisburg.

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